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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: DAS CAMP AFFIRMS U.S. SUPPORT FOR PEACE
PROCESS

REF: (A) COLOMBO 2000 (B) COLOMBO 1992 (C) COLOMBO 1858

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission W. Lewis Amselem: Reasons 1.5 (b
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¶11. (C) Summary: During his October 24-27 visit to Sri Lanka, South Asia Bureau DAS Donald Camp delivered a message of firm U.S. support for the peace process. At the same time, Camp encouraged both government and opposition leaders not to let cohabitation stresses threaten the progress made thus far toward peace. Pressing the GSL to sign an ICC Article 98 Agreement, Camp received continued assurances from the Prime Minister that Sri Lanka would sign the agreement soon. End Summary.

The PM on Peace and Internal Politics

¶12. (C) DAS Camp and the Ambassador called on Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on October 24. Camp opened the meeting by expressing the high level of hope in the USG for Sri Lanka's peace process. As impressed as the U.S. is with what Sri Lanka has achieved on peace, Camp continued, we are concerned that internal politics might threaten the progress made. As reported ref A, Wickremesinghe then reviewed his take on the current rift within the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (not a problem) and cohabitation strains with President Kumaratunga (still a problem). Camp asked Wickremesinghe what his government could do to get the President's unequivocal support for the peace process. Wickremesinghe said there was little hope of getting the President on board, but asserted that his government for its part would continue to try to work with her.

¶13. (C) Camp told the PM he welcomed the appointment of Devinda Subasinghe as Sri Lankan Ambassador in Washington. Camp said he had known Subasinghe for years and that Subasinghe himself knows Washington well; he would be an asset to Sri Lanka. The Ambassador suggested, as he has in the past, that GSL might find it useful to post a Defense Attaché in Washington, in light of increasing military exchanges between our two governments. Wickremesighe said he thought it was a good idea and would look into it further.

Article 98 Agreement

¶14. (C) Camp thanked Wickremesinghe for his government's "political decision" to sign an ICC Article 98 agreement, and asked when Sri Lanka would be ready to sign. Wickremesinghe recalled that he had assured A/S Rocca in New York (during a meeting on the margins of the UNGA) that Sri Lanka would sign; it is now just a question of getting the Foreign Ministry bureaucracy to move. Camp noted that many nations had already signed Article 98 agreements with us. Signing soon would win GSL valuable positive attention among Washington decision-makers; waiting too long could result in other countries stealing Sri Lanka's thunder. Wickremesinghe assured Camp that he would push the MFA to sign soon.

¶15. (C) Camp raised Article 98 in a meeting with Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando the following day, reiterating the same points he made to the PM. Fernando noted that the MFA legal division had proposed an additional paragraph for the agreement (ref B) that would make it easier for GSL to sign. The Ambassador expressed skepticism that the additional paragraph would be acceptable to Washington, saying that Washington had put a lot of work into the text of the agreement and that many other countries had signed it without modifications. Fernando asked Camp and the Ambassador to await Washington's official response to the proposed additional text and revisit the issue afterward, if necessary.

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Key Ministers, GoN Ambassador Discuss Situation

¶16. (C) Over drinks at the Ambassador's Residence on October 25, DAS Camp met with G.L. Peiris and Milinda Moragoda, two key ministers, and Norwegian Ambassador Jon Westborg. G.L.

Peiris kicked off the discussion with a long discourse focused on how much he distrusted President Kumaratunga. On this point, Peiris said the President wanted to destroy the peace process to ensure her own political gain. Her (October 24) speech made clear that she was laying the basis to undermine government's peace initiative and also its economic policies. Peiris said this latter issue, in particular, was of concern because the government was picking up much criticism over cost of living increases and cuts in welfare subsidies which had been mandated by the IMF. He said he had little doubt that the President was working in tandem with the radical JVP (Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna) party to drive home such points with the public in an effort to completely undermine the PM. Despite all the problems he had with the President, Peiris said he still supported trying to work with her in some way, including through regular briefings on the status of the peace process, but he was not optimistic of success.

17. (C) Moragoda noted that it was this sort of criticism on the economic front that made the government propose the conference in Oslo in late November. Moragoda added that the GSL hoped that donors could announce "quick impact" projects at the conference that would support the peace process in this time of difficulty. Westborg agreed that the conference was critical, particularly as it came at a time when the government was having a tough time getting the "economic wheels turning." Questioned about participation by other countries, Moragoda said British Minister Clare Short had indicated that she might be able to attend. Norway and Sri Lanka continued to work with India on the issue. India was naturally concerned about the issue of Tiger participation, but Moragoda said he was reasonably confident that something could be worked out. Westborg confirmed that Anton Balasingham, the Tigers' spokesman and lead negotiator, would represent the group in Oslo. He noted that the Tigers had been talked out of demanding "an equal seat at the table" with the government in Oslo. All they really wanted, Westborg related, was to be "treated with dignity." Both Moragoda and Westborg expressed appreciation to Deputy Secretary Armitage for his commitment to participate at the

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Oslo conference.

18. (C) Asked about criticism from the President's party (such as that from former Foreign Minister Kadirgamar) that the government was not dealing with the tough issues in its talks with the Tigers, Peiris replied that the government had no intention of following a "failed" model. Explaining his point, Peiris said the previous government had wasted great time (in 1999-2001) by demanding that the Tigers agree to this or that point before agreeing to come to face-to-face negotiations and in fact talks never did take place. The current government, however, was elected on a platform committing itself to trying to end the war. To implement this objective, the government had decided to get to talks as soon as possible, including by removing the legal ban on the Tigers. Peiris remarked that the government was committed to a course of "consistent confidence-building" with the Tigers. Once "confidence had been built," then the tough issues could be grappled with -- "You cannot put the cart before the horse in these matters," he underlined.

19. (C) In a separate meeting with Minister for Employment and Labor and Chief Whip Mahinda Samarasinghe, DAS Camp heard that the majority of MPs are committed to peace, and though elections may consolidate the UNF's position, the negative effects on the peace process would be unacceptable. Samarasinghe criticized President Kumaratunga's actions, saying that she is not acting in a way that recognizes that she must get along with the PM. He praised the Ambassador's public and private support of the peace process and USAID's assistance with his Productivity Policy. Samarasinghe discussed the strong role of labor unions and the difficulty he is experiencing in passing labor reforms. Camp explained that the USG wants to support the peace process, as well as economic and labor reforms, and that we will be as helpful as we can. Samarasinghe concluded with specific requests for Dept. of Labor assistance to establish a Bureau of Labor Statistics, and for USAID assistance to monitor the implementation of the National Productivity Policy.

Muslim Leader Reviews Party Infighting, Talks

110. (C) DAS Camp and DCM also met with Rauf Hakeem, the Minister of Ports and Shipping, and head of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). Asked about the troubled situation in his party (see ref A), Hakeem admitted that he was having serious problems controlling a group of rebel SLMC MPs. He complained that the rebels had little understanding of the complexities of negotiating with the Tamil Tigers, but insisted on making demands that would make it impossible to continue negotiations. Hakeem said he understood that

Muslims in the east were worried about their situation given the pressure they were under from the Tamil Tigers. The answer to their problems, however, was not to destroy the peace process with unreasonable demands, but to work the process so that Muslim views were truly heard. In doing this, Muslims should continue to demand and expect that pressure would be put on the Tigers to honor the February cease-fire accord. The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) had to do a better job of holding the Tigers accountable for their actions, particularly the Tiger-instigated hartals (strikes), which were very destructive for Muslim businesses, Hakeem stressed.

¶ 11. (C) Queried about the second round of talks scheduled to begin on October 31 in Thailand, Hakeem remarked that he might not be attending. His SLMC opponents would criticize him no matter what he did and he was reluctant to give them any openings at this time. On the other hand, Hakeem continued, he wanted to ensure that Muslims were not forgotten in the peace process and that fact might motivate him to attend. Given all the pros-and-cons, he had not finally made up his mind on the question of attending and planned to meet the PM on October 26 to discuss the issue. Hakeem added that it was also not clear when or whether he would be meeting Tamil Tiger leader V. Prabhakaran. (Note: After the conclusion of the first round of talks in mid-September, it was announced that Hakeem would meet with Prabhakaran soon.) Hakeem said the Tigers were giving signals that they did not want the meeting to take place at this time, perhaps because of the problems in the SLMC. Hakeem said he was still willing to meet Prabhakaran, but was not sure that a meeting would take place anytime soon.

Meetings with the Opposition

¶ 12. (C) DAS Camp focused on peace process and cohabitation issues during his October 25 meeting with Mahinda Rajapakse, Leader of the Opposition People's Alliance (PA). Camp queried Rajapakse on what the UNP has to do on the peace process to satisfy the PA. Rajapakse commented that the President thinks the peace process "is her baby" and she wants credit for it. Camp cited a number of speeches made by the Prime Minister acknowledging the President's early efforts at peace. Rajapakse said recognition is not enough; the President and her party deserve a representative at the talks.

¶ 13. (C) Camp emphasized to Rajapakse the USG's hope that the peace process not founder because of political problems in Colombo. The USG would like to see the parties cooperate on the issue of peace, Camp said. Rajapakse agreed, but highlighted some concerns of the opposition. First and foremost, the LTTE is still recruiting and fundraising. Second, many Sinhalese are convinced that the Norwegians are too sympathetic to the LTTE, and many in the PA share that concern. Finally, the proposed Joint Task Force that is to oversee development spending in the north and east must be accountable to the Parliament, Rajapakse said; the people will not be willing to let the LTTE control development money. Camp responded that the U.S. believes the Norwegians are working in good faith for peace. Regarding the Joint Task Force, Camp said the U.S. always insists on proper accountability procedures for its development assistance and Sri Lanka will be no exception.

¶ 14. (C) DAS Camp and Ambassador Wills met with former foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, a key adviser of President Kumaratunga, on October 25. Asked about the nationally televised speech given by the President on October 24 (see ref A), Kadirgamar commented that the President had had to give the speech in order to highlight her concerns about the direction of the peace process. The President strongly supported the objective of peace, but was concerned that the government was not informing the country of exactly what it had in mind. Indeed, the government and the Norwegian facilitators have noted that the GSL and the Tigers might take "years" to reach substantive agreement on what a final settlement might look like. That is much too long. The government should tell the country by "mid-year next year (2003)" precisely what it has in mind, Kadirgamar asserted. If the government fails to do this, the President will be forced to make an issue of it, he averred. DAS Camp underscored the USG's strong support for peace process. It was vital that the PM and the President work together in the national interest, DAS Camp stressed. Ambassador Wills emphasized that Sri Lanka had a "once in a generation chance for peace" and it was important that this opportunity not be squandered due to political infighting.

¶ 15. (C) In response to a query on how cohabitation was working, Kadirgamar replied that President Kumaratunga accepted the current situation and had made clear she was willing to reach out to the government in her October 24 speech. Cohabitation was here to stay in Sri Lanka just as

it was a permanent feature of politics in some European countries, and both parties had to get used to that fact. The President had no intention of calling elections and the government should accept that, Kadirgamar stated. Kadirgamar went on to note that a good model for future cohabitation cooperation was the semi-regular schedule of meetings the two sides had agreed to on peace process and national security issues (see ref C). Wrapping up, Kadirgamar related that the government had to understand that any agreements it reached with the Tamil Tigers would be subject to parliamentary approval and perhaps even a referendum. It would be best if it worked with the President and her party now on these issues, and not surprise them with the unexpected, he noted.

Comment

¶16. (C) DAS Camp's visit reinforced the message of U.S. support for the peace process delivered earlier by Deputy Secretary Armitage (in August) and SA A/S Rocca (in March).

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The GSL and the opposition also heard clearly his message that the U.S. does not want to see the peace process derailed by internal politics. Fortunately the peace process appears to be gaining strength, in spite of cohabitation tensions and strains within the government coalition.

¶17. (C) The GSL remains committed at the political level to signing an Article 98 agreement, and DAS Camp's visit did much to help push this forward. Winning over the bureaucrats at the MFA, especially the lawyers, will take additional work. Post is confident that GSL will sign the kind of Article 98 agreement that we want; we are working to ensure that happens sooner rather than later.

¶18. (U) DAS Camp did not have the opportunity to clear this message prior to departing Colombo.
WILLS